

Editorial

Soon after the Fourth International Conference of Women concluded in Beijing, an acquaintance asked me, with a touch of exasperation in his voice, "What good did that conference do? A lot of women got together and just talked for two weeks, but now the world's attention is focused on other matters. What did those women really change?" This comment reflects a widespread and incorrect belief that the Beijing conference was merely the culmination of three years of planning, discussions, and re-draftings of the Conference document, *The Platform for Action*. Yes, processes begun years ago did indeed culminate in Beijing. But the point of the conference was not just to discuss, debate and draft a report, the ultimate aim is yet to be achieved: to encourage governments throughout the world to realize the goals and live up to the ideals embodied in *The Platform for Action*. Those goals and ideals, if pursued seriously and implemented with commitment by all the nations of the world, would improve the lives not only of the world's women, but the lives of men and children as well.

The final draft of *The Platform for Action* does not consider women as separate from the social, cultural and political contexts in which they live. Rather, it depicts women's lives as lived in common with men and children. The theme of the Fourth International Conference for Women, "Equality, Peace and Development", did not stress that women should be given more rights, different rights, or better rights than men, it simply demands that age-old forms of discrimination against women be recognized for what they are: pernicious forms of injustice which harm not only women, but ultimately, the entire human race.

Two particular forms of injustice to women received considerable attention at the Beijing conference: the growing impoverishment of women throughout the world, and increasing violence against women, whether in the form of domestic violence or political violence occurring during wars. The feminization of poverty, which is increasingly apparent in (though not limited to) the developing world, and violent attacks on women, whether mounted by husbands, fathers, brothers, boyfriends, or enemy soldiers *qua* rapists, did not receive as much attention or mobilize as many activists ten years ago at the Nairobi Conference. But then, in 1985 there were not (as there were in 1995) 52 different wars raging in 42 different countries. Although men comprise the overwhelming majority of combatants in these wars, women and children usually pay the biggest price during periods of violent conflict and political upheaval. As noted recently by Amnesty International, women and children comprise 80 percent of the world's rapidly growing refugee population.

Remedying the poverty and violence currently afflicting so

many of the world's women and children will first require curing the various forms of political dysfunction spawning so many wars throughout the world, and second, devising new forms of political power-sharing and more just means of distributing economic resources in order to lessen the factors leading to wars. Women, most of whom spend the greater part of their adult lives caring for and nurturing others, certainly have the experience and qualifications needed for forging healthier political and economic structures for the coming millennium. If our current century is any indication of the feasibility and benefits of political structures devised solely by men, women could not possibly do worse!

Women's suffering as a result of the multiplying conflicts in the world is not just a feminist issue, it is a *human* issue, as the interviews in the File section of this special double issue of *Al-Raida* attest. To mark the twentieth anniversary of the start of the Lebanese war and the fifth anniversary of its cessation, we focused on women's memories of war, their views concerning the war's impact upon and meaning in their lives, and their assessments of the conditions confronting Lebanese women in the post-war period. The observations and conclusions of many of the women we interviewed echo the recommendations of the final draft of the Beijing Conference's *Platform for Action*: women must be better educated about their legal rights and the means of defending them, women should play a greater role in decision-making at all levels of their society, women's economic contributions to family and society should be recognized, and women's gifts, talents and capabilities should be valued equally with men's. The women we interviewed, all of whom are respected leaders in their fields, also offered sage words of advice to their sisters in war-torn Somalia, Bosnia, Sri Lanka and Chechnia: "You are the creators and nurturers of life, so avoid and resist those who wish to create death and destruction. Do everything you can to prevent your husbands, fathers, brothers and sons from participating in the dirty business of killing." In the hope that the women of other war-ravaged countries can learn something from Lebanese women's experience, we are sending copies of this issue of *Al-Raida* to non-governmental organizations responding to the needs of women and children in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Chechnia.

Laurie King-Irani
Editor

Long-time subscribers to Al-Raida will note the addition of two new features in this issue: an Opinion column (page 3) and a selection of interesting quotations concerning women's issues culled from other publications, entitled "Quote/Unquote". We encourage our readers to send in their own contributions to the Opinion column, and to share with us any interesting articles (in English, French or Arabic) on issues affecting Arab women.